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NEWS RELEASE

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Paul J. McNulty, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, announced that Mohamad Belal Almasri, age 32 of West Palm Beach, Florida, pleaded guilty today to conspiracy to commit kidnaping and to using a firearm during a crime of violence in connection with a kidnaping that began in Washington D.C. and ended in West Palm Beach, Florida. The victims were lured by one of the co-conspirators, Youssef Tellawi, to West Palm Beach ostensibly to purchase a business owned by another co-conspirator, Slimane Bourouhen. In fact, Tellawi, Almasri, and Bourouhen had planned to kidnap the victims and hold them for ransom. In anticipation of this, Bourouhen enlisted Aaron Loray and Daniel Bythwood, who agreed to assist in the kidnaping.

On July 19, 2004, Tellawi and the victims traveled to West Palm Beach. They met Almasri and followed him to Bourouhen's business. Shortly after the victims entered the business, Bourouhen brandished a shotgun and ordered them into a bathroom at the back of the business, where Loray and Bythwood handcuffed them. The kidnapers then took the victims' billfolds, credit cards, cash, and jewelry, and demanded their PIN numbers. Almasri and Tellawi attempted to withdraw money from the victims' accounts at ATM machines, but were unsuccessful. When they returned to the business and told Bourouhen what had happened, Bourouhen pointed the shotgun at the victims, threatening to kill them. The kidnappers then demanded that the victims call family members and friends to obtain a ransom of \$200,000 each. The victims were held by the kidnapers until the next morning, when they managed to free themselves and escape while the kidnapers were away.

Almasri's plea brings to four those convicted in the kidnaping. Bythwood, Loray, and Tellawi have each pled guilty to the same charges of conspiracy and use of a firearm in a crime of violence. Each defendant faces a possible sentence of two consecutive life sentences. The firearm charges carry a mandatory seven-year minimum, consecutive to any sentence imposed for the conspiracy to kidnap. Almasri is scheduled to be sentenced on April 22, 2005. Loray and Tellawi are to be sentenced on March 18, 2005, and Bythwood is to be sentenced on April 15, 2005. Bourouhen also faces charges in connection with the kidnaping and is believed to have fled to Algeria.

This case was investigated by detectives from the Montgomery County, Maryland, and West Palm Beach Police Departments, the FBI and US Marshals Service. Assistant United States Attorney James P. Gillis prosecuted the case for the United States.